

False friends in greater depth

Naughty

If someone says ‘Don’t be naughty’, what could the sentence possibly mean? Who might it be spoken to? Think about it for a moment, before reading on.

These days, the adjective has a remarkably narrow semantic range.

- You’d be likely to hear it used by an adult to admonish a child or animal, or by one child to another (‘That’s naughty, my mum says’): the sense is ‘badly behaved’. When adults use it to each other, it takes on a playful or jocular tone: here the sense is ‘improper’.
- Lecturers about to make a daring or unorthodox point might preface their remark by saying ‘It’s a bit naughty to say this, but ...’ Stand-up comics sometimes call a cheeky member of their audience ‘naughty’. Chat-show hosts can call a guest who has made a bitchy point ‘naughty’. A TV policeman may address a captured criminal: ‘You’ve been a naughty boy, haven’t you?’ Here, the general sense is ‘improper’.
- And, of course, there is the sense of ‘sexually suggestive’, ranging from risqué to outright obscene. ‘They’ve cut out the naughty bits’, ‘Michael’s said a naughty word.’

In all cases, the word gives the impression that the action is not especially grave, even when it is. So, when Gloucester describes Regan as a ‘naughty lady’ (*King Lear* 3.7.37), or Leonato calls Borachio a ‘naughty man’ (*Much Ado About Nothing* 5.1.284), our automatic impression is to think that these are mild, ‘smack-hand’ rebukes, playful or jocular. But such interpretations would be totally wrong.

In Shakespeare’s day, *naughty* had a very serious range of senses. Its strongest meaning was ‘wicked, evil, vile’. You’d probably notice that something was odd when you heard Shylock furiously addressing the prison officer who is taking Antonio to jail as a *naughty gaoler* (*Merchant of Venice* 3.3.9). It seems hardly likely that a gaoler could be ‘naughty’.

But it’s not so easy to notice anything odd in contexts where a playful meaning would make sense, as when Falstaff (pretending to be King Henry) calls Prince Hal a ‘naughty varlet’ (*Henry IV Part I* 2.4.420), or Flavius calls a cobbler a ‘naughty knave’ (*Julius Caesar* 1.1.15). It’s very important to note, therefore, that nothing playful is intended here. Nor when Buckingham says to King Henry, ‘A sort of naughty persons ... / Have practised dangerously against your state’ (*Henry VI Part 2* 2.1.162). These must be evil people.

Objects and concepts can also be seriously naughty. King Henry talks about Jesus living ‘Upon this naughty earth’ (*Henry VIII* 5.1.138). There is a note of real moral impropriety when Elbow describes Mistress Overdone’s abode as ‘a naughty house’ (*Measure for Measure* 2.1.74). Portia talks to Bassanio about ‘these naughty times’ (*Merchant of Venice* 3.2.18). And there is Portia’s famous description of a candle flame in the darkness: ‘So shines a good deed in a naughty world’ (*Merchant of Venice* 5.1.91). All evil, also.

There is a further sense of *naughty*, which is just as strong. ‘’Tis a naughty night to swim in’, says the Fool to Lear (*King Lear* 3.4.106) – where the word means ‘bad, nasty, horrible’. A similar sense applies when Lafew describes Parolles to the King as ‘a naughty orator’ (*All’s Well That Ends Well* 5.3.253). He isn’t describing him as ‘evil’ here – just as ‘bad, inferior, awful’.

Watch out for these strong senses in related words, too. The adverb, *naughtily*, is found in just one play: Cressida says to Troilus, ‘You smile and mock me, as if I meant naughtily’ – that is, ‘wickedly, immorally’ (*Troilus and Cressida* 4.2.37). And also look out for *naught* – which is where *naughty* originally comes from, in the sense ‘having naught’, that is, being poor or needy. *Naught* also developed forceful meanings in the sixteenth century. ‘A paramour is ... a thing of naught’, says Flute in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (4.2.14) – by which he means ‘a thing of great wickedness’. And the Nurse tells Juliet that men are ‘All forsworn, all naught, all dissemblers’ (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.2.87), where she means ‘bad, wicked’. ‘You are naught’, says Ophelia to Hamlet (*Hamlet* 3.2.156) – she means he’s being ‘improper, offensive’. All a far cry from being a smack-hand tease.

Ecstasy

Whoever decided to call the name of the drug *ecstasy* didn’t know much about etymology. Obviously someone noticed the modern meaning of ‘intense delight’ or ‘rapture’, and figured that this association

would attract the potential purchaser. But the name wouldn't have had the desired effect in Shakespeare's time.

The modern sense was emerging in the sixteenth century; but it was long preceded by a much wider range of senses, and these are the ones found in Shakespeare. To catch the meaning you first of all have to imagine a scale of emotional intensity, with a weak end and a strong end. At the weak end, *ecstasy* means little more than 'emotion' or 'feeling'. It turns up in this sense a couple of times in Shakespeare's poems. In *A Lover's Complaint*, the woman in the poem is said to experience a 'suffering ecstasy' (l. 69). Here the adjective gives the meaning away: you can hardly be *ecstatic*, in the modern sense, if you are suffering. This is the full quotation:

If ... there may be aught applied / Which may her suffering ecstasy assuage ...
All this means is: 'I wonder if there is any way to make her feel better.'

You'll find the same sort of use in *Venus and Adonis*, where the poet describes Venus: 'Thus stands she in a trembling ecstasy' (l. 895). And in *Macbeth* (4.3.170), Ross complains about the state of Scotland to Macduff and Malcolm:

It cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave ... where violent sorrow seems / A modern ecstasy. When sorrow is the normal kind of feeling we experience, Ross is saying, we can hardly talk about Scotland as a 'mother'.

Further up the emotional scale, we find *ecstasy* having the meaning of 'mental fit' or 'frenzy'. This is well illustrated by the Courtesan's description of the increasingly confused and angry Antipholus of Ephesus in *The Comedy of Errors* (4.4.49). Look how his fit is making him shake, she says:

Mark how he trembles in his ecstasy.

This is the commonest sense of the word in Shakespeare: it turns up eight times, and usually you can get an idea about the stronger meaning by noting the context carefully. From earlier scenes we know that Antipholus is getting very angry, so much so that people are beginning to think he's going mad.

Sometimes the clue appears in the same sentence, in an emotionally intensifying word. I've underlined it in these next quotations:

– In *Much Ado About Nothing* (2.3.152), Leonato talks about Beatrice to Claudio:

the ecstasy hath so much overborne her

– In *The Tempest* (3.3.110), Gonzalo asks Adrian to protect Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian from their apparently violent behaviour:

hinder them from what this ecstasy / May now provoke them to

– In *Macbeth* (3.2.22), Macbeth says to his wife:

better be with the dead ... / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy.

– And in *Hamlet* (2.1.102), Polonius talks about Hamlet's strange behaviour to Ophelia:

This is the very ecstasy of love

If you want to follow up some other uses of this sense of the word, take a look at *Othello* 4.1.79, and the two cases in *Titus Andronicus*: 4.1.124 and 4.4.21.

In all these examples, the implication is that someone is 'beside himself/herself' with anxiety or fear or passion or some other very intense emotion. You could faint from an ecstasy, or fall into a trance – and indeed it retains this sort of sense in modern psychological medicine, where it refers to a kind of nervous disorder in which the mind is so absorbed in a particular notion that it can't notice its surroundings..

But the strongest sense of *ecstasy* is to be found later in *Hamlet*, where the meaning is 'lunacy' or 'madness'. Ophelia reflects to herself sadly about Hamlet's matured youth (3.1.161):

That unmatched form and feature of blown youth / Blasted with ecstasy

And when Hamlet goes to talk to his mother, we find two clear instances of this sense (3.4.75, 139). The first is when Hamlet tells his mother that he is not mad:

sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrall'd

He means: my ability to speak good sense has never been put under the control of madness. And the second is when Gertrude says – still thinking Hamlet is mad, after he has claimed to see the ghost of his dead father:

This bodiless creation ecstasy / Is very cunning in.

Madness is good at thinking up visions, she says. And this is where you can get rid of any lingering doubts about this meaning of the word, for Hamlet then makes it perfectly clear:

Ecstasy? It is not madness that I have uttered.

You can't have a context clearer than that.

Lover

I don't suppose anyone would ever bother to look the word *lover* up in a dictionary; but if they did they would get a range of examples like these:

Ermintrude had many lovers when she lived in Italy.

A few days later they became lovers.

The newspaper claimed that he and the congressman were once lovers.

She feared her lover would not return.

Pretty obviously, we are talking about sex in each of these cases – and, moreover, sex between people who are not married and including all possible male/female combinations. The word conveys a sense of the passion and emotion involved in such liaisons. If the parties concerned are already married, of course, there is a strong hint of the illicit. We are entering a world of secrets, subterfuge, and discovery. It is a word which appeals to newspapers and novelists alike.

Love, in its various forms – *loving*, *loved*, *lovest*, and so on – is really common in Shakespeare; it turns up in the plays about 2,000 times. And when people fall in love, they are naturally enough called *lovers*.

Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth
says Duke Theseus about Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena, at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.28). They are people in love, no more. The word suggests nothing sexual about their relationship. When Shakespeare was writing this play, in the mid 1590s, the word *lover* didn't have any illicit connotations. Or maybe they were just on the point of coming into the language. The first recorded instance of the word in the sense of 'paramour' is not until 1611, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Thou hast played the harlot with many lovers.

This appears in the King James Bible – in *Jeremiah* (3.1).

By that time, *lover* had been in the language for over 300 years. It is first recorded in 1225, and it soon developed a range of senses. But none of them was sexual. The original sense, as you'd expect, was 'someone enamoured of a person of the opposite sex'. The word then developed an everyday sense of someone who was a companion, comrade, or dear friend. Your mates were your lovers. And there was a spiritual sense too: God could be your lover, and you could be a lover of God.

These were still the major senses when Shakespeare was writing. So you have to be especially careful not to read a sexual sense in when someone refers to someone else as his lover. You need the sense of 'comrade' when the old counsellor Menenius refers to the general, Coriolanus, in this way (*Coriolanus* 5.2.14). He tries to persuade some soldiers on watch to let him go into a house in order to talk to Coriolanus:

I tell thee, fellow,

Thy general is my lover.

And when Ulysses says to Achilles 'I as your lover speak' (*Troilus and Cressida* 3.3.214), there's no suggestion that either of them is gay.

This sense of 'friend' turns up several times in *Julius Caesar*. When Brutus harangues the crowd with 'Romans, countrymen, and lovers, hear me for my cause' (3.2.13), he isn't singling out 'people in love' as a particular target for his rhetoric. He is simply appealing to everyone as his friends. And the same point applies when Artemidorus writes a letter to Caesar, warning him of plots, and closes it with the words, 'Thy lover' (2.3.8). He isn't suggesting that they've been having an affair. Nor have Brutus and Cassius, when Brutus describes them as having been 'lovers in peace' (5.1.94). Nor have Brutus and Caesar, when Brutus says 'I slew my best lover for the good of Rome' (3.2.45).

There's even an occasion when the non-sexual sense of *lover* is contrasted with a word where sex is definitely part of the meaning. This is in the poem sequence called *The Passionate Pilgrim* (item VII), when the poet asks of a lady:

Was this a lover, or a lecher whether?

In other words, which of the two was she – someone chaste and true in her love, or someone unchaste and untrustworthy?

There are about a dozen places in Shakespeare when you need to be specially aware that *lover* is a false friend; but in all of his uses – I've counted around 125 in all the plays and poems – you need to forget about sex. The plots can get very confusing, otherwise.

Rude

If someone says to you, ‘Don’t be rude’, you’ve done one of two things. Either you’ve been daringly impolite – like putting your tongue out at someone. Or you’ve been rather indecent, having just said a naughty word or told a dirty joke.

Rude is quite a common word in Shakespeare. It turns up over 70 times in the plays and poems. What you have to remember is that it is *never* used in the modern sexual usage, and hardly ever in the impolite sense either. (The same point applies, incidentally, to the related words *rudeness* and *rudely*.)

I know of only four occasions when the word means ‘impolite’ or ‘offensive’. One is in *As You Like It*, when Duke Senior tells off Orlando for being ‘a rude despiser of good manners’ (2.7.93). It was understandable. Orlando had just barged in and demanded the food off the Duke’s plate! Another is in *Henry VI Part 2*, when the Kentish squire Alexander Iden encounters the rebel Jack Cade in his garden, and says: ‘rude companion, whatsoe’er thou be’ (4.10.29). Seeing as Cade has just called Iden a villain, and threatened to shove his sword down his throat, *rude* is really rather mild. Iden’s obviously a decent chap. The third occasion is when Falstaff calls Prince Hal ‘a rude prince’ (*Henry IV Part 2* 1.2.96), and the fourth is when a character talks about ‘rude behaviour’ in *Henry VIII* (4.2.103).

The only hint of a sexual sense is in *Romeo and Juliet* (2.3.24), when Friar Laurence says, ‘Two such opposed kings encamp them still / In man as well as herbs – grace and rude will.’ Here *rude* means ‘of the flesh, uncontrolled’. But this is still quite a long way from the modern meaning.

Everywhere else, prepare for differences. The word applies to both people and things.

Rude people

The ‘violent’ meaning When Ulysses says ‘the rude son should strike his father dead’ (*Troilus and Cressida* 1.3.115), the son is hardly being just impolite! Here the word means ‘violent’, ‘harsh’ or ‘unkind’. Peasants, rebels, and brawls can all be *rude* in this sense. Someone talks about ‘rude fishermen’ in *The Comedy of Errors* (5.1.358). And Cade’s army is described as a ‘ragged multitude’ in *Henry VI Part 2* (4.4.33). Hands, tongues, eyes, and breath can all be rude, because of the violent things they can do.

The ‘uncultured’ meaning Anyone uncultured or ignorant could be called *rude*. Puck calls the rustics ‘rude mechanicals’ in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (3.2.9), and Prince Hal, according to his dad, has been frequenting ‘rude society’ (*Henry IV Part 1* 3.2.14). Nobles often call ordinary people *rude*, in fact: Warwick talks about the ‘rude multitude’ (*Henry VI Part 2* 3.2.135), and a few lines later Suffolk describes the members of the commons as ‘rude unpolished hinds’. Somebody from Inde (= India) is said to be ‘a rude and savage man’ in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (4.3.220).

The ‘inexpert’ meaning This sense appears only a handful of times, but you will need it when you hear Othello describing his ability to tell a story: ‘Rude am I in my speech’ (*Othello* 1.3.81). Pandarus describes his own musical ability as ‘Rude, in sooth’ (*Troilus and Cressida* 3.1.55). And when Romeo describes his hand as ‘rude’ compared to Juliet’s (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.5.51), he is criticising himself as an amateur in love.

The ‘raucous’ meaning This meaning also has just a handful of uses. You’ll hear it when Bassanio criticises Gratiano for being ‘too rude and bold of voice’ (*The Merchant of Venice* 2.2.168), or when the Bastard describes Peter of Pomfret as using ‘rude harsh-sounding rhymes’ (*King John* 4.2.150). Here, *rude* means ‘cacophonous’.

Rude things

Applied to things, the word chiefly meant ‘rough’ and ‘wild’: hedges, walls, and castles can all be *rude*. Caesar talks about ‘The roughest berry on the rudest hedge’ (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.4.64) and Henry Bolingbroke tells Northumberland to ‘Go to the rude ribs of that ancient castle’ (*Richard II* 3.3.32). Briars are said to be ‘rude-growing’ in *Titus Andronicus* (2.3.198).

The waves could be rude too – here the word means ‘stormy’. The word collocates especially with sea and wind. Albany talks about the ‘rude wind’ blowing in Gonerill’s face (*King Lear* 4.2.30), and King Richard uses it in a famous line: ‘Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king’ (*Richard II* 3.2.54).

If you travelled back in time and met Shakespeare, and said you were going to tell him a rude joke, he wouldn’t have known what you meant. Apart from the fact that the word *joke* didn’t exist in his day (it is first recorded in English in 1670), he would think you were just going to tell him something

uncultured or harsh-sounding – or, of course, that you were apologising for not being able to tell it very well.

Silly

‘Don’t be silly!’ is a common enough remark these days, along with ‘That’s just silly’, ‘Silly idiot’, and a host of other put-downs. The common theme is the meaning of ‘foolish’ or ‘stupid’ – but in a mild sort of way. The implication is always that the reason for making the comment – the behaviour that has attracted attention – has little serious consequence. Most of the sketches by the Monty Python team, by their own admission, were just plain ‘silly’.

This sense was beginning to come into the language in Shakespeare’s time. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the nobles are watching the play being put on by Bottom and his associates. Hippolyta says to Theseus, ‘This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard’ (5.1.207). But this is a rather unusual usage at the end of the sixteenth century. An older set of senses dominate in the plays and poems, and you have to be careful not to read in the modern meaning.

The chief cluster of meanings all relate to the notion of some person or animal being ‘helpless’, ‘defenceless’, or ‘vulnerable’ to some sort of attack or threat. This is the sense you have to bear in mind when Henry VI’s Queen calls herself a ‘silly woman’ (*Henry VI Part 3* 1.1.243), or when secretary Lodowick says of the Countess of Salisbury (*Edward III* 2.1.18): ‘If she looked pale, ’twas silly woman’s fear.’ And Valentine agrees to lead an outlaw band as long as his new companions ‘do no outrages / On silly women’ (*Two Gentlemen of Verona* 4.1.72).

Men can be silly, in this sense, too. In *Edward III* the king describes a group of Frenchmen as ‘poor silly men, much wronged’ (4.2.29), and in the Folio text the deposed King Richard talks about ‘silly beggars’ sitting in the stocks (*Richard II* 5.5.25). Sheep and lambs are also described as ‘silly’. Henry VI talks about ‘shepherds looking on their silly sheep’ (*Henry VI Part 3* 2.5.43), and ‘silly lambs’ turn up in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1.166) and *Venus and Adonis* (1.1098) – in both cases, where they are being threatened by wolves.

We can trace a number of related meanings from the ‘vulnerable’ sense. When the Countess, unimpressed by the physical appearance of the English general, Talbot, describes him as ‘a child, a silly dwarf’ (in *Henry VI Part 1* 2.3.231), she means he is looking feeble or weak. And a person with a menial job could be described in the same way: a servant in *The Rape of Lucrece* (l. 1345) is described as a ‘silly groom’.

This leads us to a meaning of ‘simple’, ‘lowly’, or ‘humble’, which can be applied to things and concepts as well as people. Clothing can be ‘silly’. In *Cymbeline* (5.3.86), a captain describes the appearance on the battlefield of ‘a fourth man, in a silly habit’. He doesn’t mean he was looking stupid – just that he was dressed like a peasant. Songs can be silly. In *Twelfth Night* (2.4.46), Count Orsino describes a song to Viola as ‘silly sooth’ – the simple truth, he means. And in this next example, the word applies to a period of time. When Warwick says to Oxford, in *Henry VI Part 3* (3.3.93), talking about the succession to the throne:

threescore and two years – a silly time

To make prescription for a kingdom’s worth

he means that 62 years is no time at all for such matters to be decided. Here *silly* means ‘trifling’ or ‘trivial’.

In all these examples, the meaning is quite strong. When King John talks to King Philip about ‘a silly fraud’ (*Edward III* 4.5.55), the subject-matter is serious. And there is an element of nastiness in the meaning when Armado says to Costard that ‘By virtue, thou enforcest laughter; thy silly thought, my spleen’ (*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 3.1.73). Your stupidity makes me angry, he is saying. It is not far from hear to the much weaker modern meaning. We can feel it waiting in the wings.

Distracted

It’s the sort of thing teachers are always going on about. Concentrate. Focus. Keep your attention on the point at issue. Don’t let yourself get distracted.

That’s the verb sense: if you have ‘been distracted’, somebody or something has made your attention wander from one thing to another. And the adjective sense is similar: people who ‘feel distracted’ have an absent-minded or anxious air. They are unable to focus or think clearly.

The modern sense is quite mild, we might reflect. If we see Mr Smith walking ‘distractedly’ along the corridor, we might worry about his bumping into something or going into the wrong classroom, but we will not call a doctor. He’s not going mad.

Not so, in Shakespeare’s time. *Distracted* came into English, at the end of the sixteenth century, both as a verb and adjective, and it had a much stronger set of meanings. The strongest involved a reference to great mental disturbance. People who were distracted were seriously perplexed and confused, even to the point of madness.

Shakespeare himself is the first recorded user of the verb and adjective in this sense. In *Henry IV Part 2* Falstaff is questioned by the Lord Chief Justice about Mistress Quickly’s complaints. Falstaff tries to suggest she is mad, using *distract* as a verb: ‘poverty hath distracted her’, he claims (2.1.105). He doesn’t mean that being poor has made her absent-minded: he means it has made her insane. If this is so, then (he hopes) her charges against him will have to be dismissed. However, he doesn’t fool the Lord Chief Justice.

And in *The Comedy of Errors*, written four or five years before, we see the first recorded use of *distracted* as an adjective in this strong sense. Adriana and others have rushed to see the Abbess, who is sheltering Antipholus the husband in her abbey. Everyone supposes Antipholus to be mad, and this is how we must interpret Adriana’s reply when the Abbess asks, ‘wherefore throng you hither?’ (5.1.38):

To fetch my poor distracted husband hence.
My poor mad husband.

Shakespeare seems to have liked using the adjective in this sense, for it is his main use of the word. Hamlet, having just met his father’s ghost, refers to his head going round and round as a ‘distracted globe’ (*Hamlet* 1.5.97), and later in the play Rosencrantz tells Claudius that Hamlet ‘does confess he feels himself distracted’ (3.1.5). In *The Tempest*, the spirit Ariel has so worked on Prospero’s enemies that they have been driven into a trance, unable to do anything, and he reports to Prospero: ‘The King, / His brother, and yours, abide all three distracted’ (5.1.12).

The ‘totally confused’ sense is well illustrated in *Macbeth*, when Lennox tells Malcolm what he saw when he went into the bedroom of the murdered King Duncan. He found Duncan’s attendants with their hands and faces covered with blood: ‘they stared and were distracted’ (2.3.101). Hardly surprising, if you had just been woken up and found your master dead and blood all over you. We need something a bit more powerful for the meaning of *distracted* than ‘not paying attention’ here.

We must be careful not to be distracted (in today’s sense) by the modern meaning, which can slip in without our noticing it. Towards the end of *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus has just spent an uncomfortable few minutes observing his lover, Cressida, who he had thought would stay faithful to him, responding to the advances of his enemy, Diomedes. He is absolutely furious!

O Cressid! O false Cressid! False, false false!
So, a few lines later, when Ulysses shows him the way out of the Greek camp, Troilus is still in a state of shock:

Ulysses: I’ll bring you to the gates.

Troilus: Accept distracted thanks.

This sounds as if he is saying ‘What was that again?’ But we can be sure this sentence means far more than that.

The sense of total confusion is the usual Shakespearian one, referring to the feelings of an individual, or of two or three people seen as individuals. Just once, the word is used to talk about a large anonymous group. This is in *Hamlet*, where Claudius says of Hamlet, ‘He’s loved of the distracted multitude’ (4.3.4). Here the word means ‘foolish’ or ‘unreasonable’. And just once, it is used in relation to things. This is towards the end of *All’s Well That Ends Well* (5.3.35), when the King of France, delighted to see Bertram, says: ‘to the brightest beams / Distracted clouds give way’. Here the word has an even more forceful meaning: ‘torn apart’ or ‘rent asunder’ – reflecting its original Latin meaning (*dis* + *tractus* – ‘draw in different directions’).

This last meaning did not stay in the language for very long. There are no reports of anyone using the word in this sense 50 years later. Perhaps they were distracted?